

HISTORICAL ORIGIN OF THE SITE

In 1758 when Halifax County was formed from Edgecombe County the Roanoke Rapids area was a region of subsistence farming occupied by British settlers from Virginia. Later cotton became the cash crop. There were few roads in this region and the Roanoke River was used for transportation, portage being necessary around the rapids. In order to overcome this difficulty beginning in 1812 the Roanoke Navigation Company was empowered by the State Legislature to improve the river, control navigation, build canals and collect tolls. Within a few years the commerce which had used this company's facilities was taken over by the new railroads which connected Gaston, Weldon, and Norfolk, thus doing away with the need for canals.

However, attention had been focused on the rapids and the property and privileges of the decayed Navigation Company were acquired by a company interested in the possible development of water power for industry. The first enterprise to take advantage of the power canal at the Great Falls was the United Industrial Company. In order to obtain a position favorable to the use of hydro-electric power, this company built its plant on the bank of the river between the canal and the river. For its employees the United Industrial Company built a village of about 30 homes. The site chosen for the settlement was about half a mile from the river and about fifty feet above the river and its flood plain terrace away from possible flooding and malaria common on the easily flooded land. This is the area which is presently between First and Third Streets.

This was soon followed by the Roanoke Mills Company, producing cotton textiles. Following the same pattern, the Roanoke Mills Company erected about 50 to 75 homes for their employees west of the present Roanoke Avenue between First and Fourth Streets. Between these two villages, there developed the first evidence of a business district when several businesses opened in the first block of Roanoke Avenue.

These two villages, known to old residents as "old town" and "new town" were designed by the architect-contractor, Stanford White, and were incorporated as one town, Roanoke Rapids in 1897. This name was adopted instead of Great Falls because it seemed to describe the site of the town more appropriately.

The main railroad line of the Gaston and Raleigh Railway was on higher ground about a mile west of Roanoke Rapids. In 1900 the Rosemary Manufacturing Company was incorporated and along with the Patterson Mill Company formed a second urban nucleus consisting of textile plants, mill housing and a number of retail establishments. This village was named Rosemary and grew as a separate town from Roanoke Rapids until 1931 when the two developments were incorporated into one municipal authority. During recent years Roanoke Rapids has grown into one large residential area, but has maintained two separate business districts.